**IN THE GOSPEL THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD IS REVEALED**

***Romans 1:1-17***

***“For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’” (v. 17)***

Romans is the first epistle in the New Testament. It presents the meaning of the gospel most systematically. Paul wrote this letter from Corinth around 57 A.D., during his third missionary journey. Apparently, the recipients were the Romans. This letter, however, has inspired not only Romans, but also countless people to truly understand the gospel and live by it. It has had an especially great impact on prominent leaders throughout Christian history—Augustine, Martin Luther, John Wesley, Karl Barth, and more. In his preface to his commentary on Romans, Martin Luther said, “This epistle is really the chief part of the New Testament and the very purest Gospel, and it is worthy not only that every Christian should know it word for word, by heart, but occupy himself with it every day, as the daily bread of the soul…” Through our study of Romans, may God bless each of us to know the profound meaning of the gospel so that we may have the assurance of our own salvation, win the victory over the sinful nature, and grow in the likeness of Christ! Furthermore, may God bless us to be equipped and empowered to eagerly preach the gospel for the glory of God!

Today’s passage is the introduction of the epistle. It contains the key verse (17) and the theme of the whole book. In this passage, Paul repeats the word, “the gospel” six times. This means that what he really wanted to tell the Romans about was the gospel. Through this introduction, Paul explains why he so earnestly desires to share the gospel with the Romans. Rightly understanding and accepting Paul’s lessons will make our study of Romans much different; more than that, it may even differentiate our eternal destination!

1. **Set apart for the gospel (vs. 1-6)**

Look at verse 1. ***“Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God…”*** According to the pattern of letters in his time, Paul begins his epistle by introducing himself first. He presents himself as a servant of Christ Jesus. Here a servant literally means a male slave. In the Roman world, a slave was his master’s property. He could not claim his own rights. He acted and worked on behalf of his master’s will with absolute submission. Paul’s identity as a servant of Christ sprang from his personal experience. In the past, he was so zealous for Judaism that he persecuted the early Christians. However, after he met the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus, he realized that he had lived as a slave to sin and the devil out of his pride and self-righteousness. He also realized that he was purchased from the bondage of slavery by the precious blood of Jesus. Now out of love and thanksgiving, he confesses that Jesus Christ is his Lord and King, and he belongs to him alone (4). In the spiritual sense, however, he was indeed a freeman when he served Christ.

Paul was also called to be an apostle. An apostle is one sent on a mission. Paul knew that he did not become an apostle by chance or by his own choice, but by God’s calling. He accepted his apostleship as God’s absolute plan for him, a plan made even before he was born (Ga 1:15). What then was his special mission as a servant of Christ and an apostle? He states that he was set apart for the gospel of God. Paul was born and called for the gospel. The gospel means “the good news.” To Paul, “the gospel” is worthy of devoting one’s entire life. Why?

First, the gospel is the gospel of God (1b). The gospel originated from God. It is not a philosophy or story invented by man. God promised the gospel and fulfilled it. Look at verse 2. ***“…the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures…”***  God promised that he would send the Messiah to save men from their sins. In fact, this promise of the Messiah is the main theme of the Bible for thousands of years in Old Testament history. The Messiah’s person and work, and his characteristics had been gradually revealed. And all the prophecies were exactly fulfilled as the Promised Messiah came into the world. Who is he?

Look at verses 3-4. ***“…regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.”*** The gospel is about the Promised Messiah, Jesus. In regards to his humanity, Jesus came as a descendant of David according to the prophecies. In regards to his divine nature, God proved that Jesus is the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead. The prophecies about the Messiah’s genuine humanity and deity were thus fully fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus is God’s Promised Messiah. He is our Savior King and Lord. The fulfillment of the gospel verifies that God is faithful and that he rules history. Since the gospel is the gospel of God, we can trust the gospel with all our hearts and make a life-long commitment to it.

Second, the gospel grants us grace and apostleship. Read verse 5. ***“Through him we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name’s sake.”*** Here “grace” means “undeserved gift or favor.” The Holy God could not but punish and condemn sinful men. But because of his overwhelming mercy and compassion, he did not act in his holy anger. Our merciful and gracious God sent his one and only Son. Jesus died on the cross and shed his blood for our sins. On the cross, Jesus prayed, *“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Lk 23:34a).* One of the criminals, being crucified for his crime, heard Jesus’ prayer. He believed Jesus’ grace of forgiveness and prayed, *“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise” (Lk 23:42-43).* Without doing anything good, simply by believing Jesus’ grace, this man received forgiveness and entered the kingdom of God. Paul received this grace and this grace is available to anyone.

All who receive the grace of Jesus also receive apostleship. This means that we receive God’s mission as Jesus’ ambassadors. From the beginning, man was created for a mission for God’s glory (Ge 1:28). God’s mission makes man’s life meaningful, happy and fruitful. After the Fall, however, man lost his mission and the meaning of life. The good news is that when God saves man, he also restores man’s mission. What is it? Verse 5b says, ***“…to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name’s sake.”*** It is to preach and teach the gospel to plant faith in people’s hearts. It is to help people to obey Jesus’ teaching and live by it (Mt 28:20a). It is to help people to recover their life’s purpose, glorifying God’s name.

The gospel is worth all our life’s devotion and commitment because it leads us to receive God’s grace and recover our holy mission through Jesus Christ. Paul had a clear life’s purpose, which was being set apart to preach the gospel as a servant and an apostle of Christ Jesus. But he says that the Romans and even all of us have been called for this very purpose (5-6). May God bless each of us to accept and renew this precious identity and calling!

1. **Obligated to preach the gospel (vs. 7-15)**

Verses 7-15 reveal Paul’s prayer for all the Roman Christians. He had never been in Rome and did not know most of them. Yet he thank God for their faith and prayed for them constantly. Also he earnestly prayed that God might open the way for him to visit Rome (7-10). What was his purpose and motive to visit Rome? Look at verse 11. ***“I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong…”*** Here, “some spiritual gift” most likely means a deeper understanding of the gospel and God’s whole salvation plan for the world. In Paul’s time, Rome was the center of politics, commerce and education for the Gentile world. It reminds me of modern-day America. All roads led to Rome and went out from Rome to all parts of the world. Paul’s missionary strategy was to build up the church in Rome as a missionary center for the whole world. Compared to the vast Roman Empire, however, the Roman Christians were spiritually young, small in number, and from the lower ranks of society. Furthermore, the hostility of the pagan culture toward the Christians in Rome made them fearful. Paul wanted them to have faith in God to see God’s grand vision and become strong. Also, he wanted to jump-start that vision by harvesting a small number of believers as Bible teachers and shepherds through personal Bible study (13). Near the end of his life, he went to Rome as a prisoner in chains. But he still taught the Bible to whoever came to him (Ac 28:31). His vision bore fruit and 250 years later, Rome became a Christian nation.

But Paul’s motive to visit Rome was not just based on evangelical strategy; it was inspired by his sense of obligation. Look at verses 14-15. ***“I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome.”*** Here the phrase “I am obligated” literally means “I am a debtor.” We all want to pay back debts as soon as possible. Right? Paul used this word because Christ paid off his debt of sin with his own life. In the Bible, sin is described as a legal debt (Mt 6:12). Man has no way to pay the debt except with his own life. But Christ died for Paul so that he might have life. So Paul was eternally indebted to Christ Jesus for his grace of forgiveness. His gratitude was expressed as his sense of obligation to share the good news with the unbelieving world.

At the same time, he had God’s broken shepherd heart. In Paul’s time, the population of the city of Rome was around one million, and one third of them were slaves. The Romans worshiped many idols including their own emperor. Their sexual immorality, including homosexuality and prostitution, prevailed. Homosexuality especially increased dramatically. Due to the immorality, abortion rates and divorce rates were high and many openly ridiculed marriage. Large landowners eventually swallowed up small farms. The dispossessed farmers moved into the cities. As they found no work, violent gangs roamed the streets, crime rose and violence flared. The upper-class people enjoyed four meals a day and sports. Along with chariot races, gladiatorial shows were a popular form of entertainment. The gladiators dying for people’s entertainment were mainly slaves or prisoners. Human life became so cheap.

From a human point of view, Rome was an advanced city with wealth and power. But from God’s point of view, it was the most corrupted place in which the gospel needed to be preached urgently. Paul shared God’ broken shepherd heart for those who were lost in Rome no matter what their human status might be. He believed that only the gospel could save the people and solve their problems. I pray that God may grant us Paul’s vision and his debtor’s heart for Rome. America is in many ways a modern-day Rome. May God continually bless our one-to-one ministry to raise Jesus’s disciples, who have debtor’s hearts for the world! Let’s earnestly pray for this nation with God’s broken shepherd heart!

1. **Not ashamed of the gospel (vs. 16-17)**

In Paul’s time, many people were ashamed of the gospel because the gospel is about Jesus of Nazareth, a poor Jewish carpenter, who was condemned and crucified. Compared to the gospel, Romans were proud of their philosophy, military power, and wealth. But Paul was not ashamed of the gospel. Why? Look at verse 16. ***“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.”*** Paul knew that the gospel is the power of God. The Greek word used here for “power” can be transliterated in English as *“dunamis.”* “Dynamite” derives its name from this word. A stick of dynamite includes very explosive material called nitroglycerin. Once a fuse is ignited, it explodes with incredible force. Because of this, since its invention, dynamite has been used to make roads or tunnels in various construction areas. Like dynamite, the gospel has highly explosive power. But fundamentally, the source of this power is the infinite and almighty Creator God.

Most importantly, the gospel has power to bring salvation to everyone who believes. Salvation means “deliverance”—deliverance from the power of sin and its penalty, the power of death, and eternal condemnation. Salvation is the greatest and absolute need of every human being, whether Jew or Gentile, rich or poor, learned or uneducated. To anyone, the most important matter is if he or she has salvation or not. Paul did not see people based on their outward appearances. He saw their definite need of salvation. Paul was also confident in the power of the gospel to change, heal and restore any kind of sinner and even the corrupted city of Rome.

Just as dynamite depends on its essential component, nitroglycerin, for its explosive power, the gospel contains its own vital factor. What is it? Look at verse 17. ***“For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’”*** In the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed. Righteousness is the requirements of God for every man to be right with him. People try to earn this righteousness through their own effort, work, or moral life. Due to man’s sinful nature, however, no one can stand righteous before God by their own merit or work. In God’s eyes, human righteousness, even that which seems very noble or impressive, is like filthy rags (Isa 64:6). The requirements of God are unattainable by ourselves. We all deserved death and eternal destruction.

But God so loved the world. He himself provided a righteousness for us. This is the grace of God to mankind. Apostle Paul calls this ***“the righteousness of God.”*** The righteousness of God is based on God’s unconditional love for sinners. God gave up his one and only Son to die as an atoning sacrifice for us and fulfilled all God’s requirements. As Jesus suffered and died on the cross, God took all our unrighteousness on the Son’s body. At the same time, he gave the Son’s righteousness to sinners. As we believe in the gospel of Jesus, God puts Jesus’ righteousness upon us and declares, “Regardless of what kind sinner you are, from now on, I call you righteous because of your faith in my righteous Son.” This declaration is immediately and eternally effective. Only through faith in Jesus Christ, we can receive the righteousness of God and have peace with him forever. What a marvelous grace it is! Do you want to be robed with the righteousness of God? Do not hesitate. The only requirement is faith alone! Simple, childlike faith! Simply come! In Isaiah 1:18 God says, *“Come now, let us settle the matter…Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.”*

If anyone hasn’t yet come by faith, now is the time to accept the righteousness of God. If you have already come, you must continually live by faith to the end until we pass through the pearly gates into the kingdom of God. Paul expresses it like this, ***“…a righteousness that is by faith from first to last…”*** Sometimes we may fall in temptations and sometimes we may be victorious in our spiritual journey. But there is never a time that we can say, “I went too far away from God” or “I am okay now, so I don’t need the righteousness of God anymore.” All the time and in any situation, we need the righteousness of God. In Galatians 2:20 Apostle Paul confesses his faith: *“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”* And he concludes this passage by quoting Habakkuk 2:4, ***“The righteous will live by faith.”***  God delights in our faith and acknowledges those who live by faith as truly righteous.

Martin Luther was a promising young man who wanted to become a lawyer. Then in 1505 his life took a dramatic turn. As the 21-year-old Luther fought his way through a severe thunderstorm on the road, a bolt of lightning struck the ground near him. “Help me, St. Anne!” Luther screamed. “I will become a monk!” The storm subsided and he was saved. The decision to become a monk was difficult and greatly disappointed his father, but he felt he must keep his promise. He gave away all his possessions and entered the monastic life. Luther was also driven by fears of hell and God’s wrath, and felt that life in a monastery would help him find salvation. He plunged into prayer, fasting, and ascetic practices—going without sleep, enduring bone-chilling cold without a blanket, and flagellating himself. He later commented, “If anyone could have earned heaven by the life of a monk, it was I.” Though he sought by these means to love God fully, he found only guilt and fear. But when he struggled with the book of Romans he experienced God’s grace. He wrote: “I had greatly longed to understand Paul’s letter to the Romans…Night and day I pondered it until…I grasped the truth that the righteousness of God is that…through grace and sheer mercy, he justifies us by faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through an open door into paradise…This passage of Paul became to me a gateway into heaven.” The righteousness of God as revealed in the gospel exploded in Luther’s life like dynamite. The gospel fully removed any barrier between him and God. This personal experience of the power of the gospel enabled him to bring the church back to gospel faith in medieval times.

Apostle Paul confessed that he was set apart for the gospel, that he was obligated to preach the gospel, and that he was not ashamed of the gospel. He eagerly wanted to share the gospel with the Romans because he believed that the gospel is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes; for in the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed. Praise be to God for his love and grace for helpless sinners. Thank you, our Lord Jesus Christ, for taking up all our unrighteousness on the cross and giving your own righteousness for us. May God strengthen us to live by faith in Jesus from first to last!